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**POLICY STATEMENT
ON
OPENING EXERCISES
AND
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
IN THE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
OF
ONTARIO**

**ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL
BOARDS' ASSOCIATION**

DECEMBER 1988

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**POLICY STATEMENT ON
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ONTARIO**

OPENING STATEMENT

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association recognizes that Ontario is a province rich in cultural, linguistic and religious diversity and heritage. This multi-cultural and multi-faith reality has been, and will continue to be, reflected in the public school system of this province.

The public school system of this province provides universally accessible educational opportunities to all learners regardless of their ethno-cultural, social or economic status, age, individual exceptionality or religious preference. The inclusive public school system which is open to all provides a learning environment which recognizes and values the differences between learners.

In providing and maintaining a learning and working environment in which racial, ethnic, cultural and religious differences are recognized and valued and discrimination is not tolerated, the public school system of Ontario has a distinct value system. This value system, which permeates the public school system, not only ensures that learners are made aware of different traditions and cultures but fosters understanding and tolerance for this rich and diverse cultural heritage.

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association believes that knowledge about religions, through the provision of opening exercises and religious education, in a way that is com-

parative and stresses similarities, can teach tolerance and promote understanding.

Recognizing the pluralistic nature of Ontario society and the multi-cultural nature of the public school system, OPSBA believes that any form of opening exercises or religious education must be multi-faith and multi-cultural in approach, have a clear ethical basis, but must **not** be confessional.

OPENING EXERCISES

Recognizing the ethnic and cultural diversity of Ontario, OPSBA supports an opening exercise format which includes the national anthem and a multi-faith approach to reading selections.

Guidelines

Guidelines for opening exercises must reflect the pluralistic, multi-cultural, multi-faith nature of Ontario society. It is recommended that these guidelines should be established by the Ministry of Education. In addition, it is recommended that a resource document with a selection of readings which recognize the multi-faith nature of Ontario society be developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Education through consultation with a multi-faith Advisory Committee on Religious Education to be established by the Ministry. The Advisory Committee should reflect the multi-faith nature of our society and include representatives from school board and teacher groups.

Local School Board Decisions

In order for the school to be responsive to local concerns, OPSBA recommends that the school principal, after consultation with the local school community, select the readings using the Ministry of Education established

guidelines and selecting from the Ministry approved resource materials with approval by the Board.

Any decision by the principal should be subject to appeal to the School Board. Parents should have the option of appealing to the Board if they do not like the principal's selection of readings for opening exercises in the school.

Compulsory Opening Exercises

OPSBA feels that, if the guidelines and resource materials are adequate, reflect the multi-faith nature of Ontario society and are pluralistic in nature, there will be no need for school exemption from the provision of opening exercises.

Exemptions

Although the pluralistic nature of opening exercises should minimize the need for personal exemptions, provision must be made for individual students to request exemption.

Holding the exercises at the beginning or ending of the day can facilitate the exemption process with late arrival or early dismissal provisions.

Exemptions should be provided, without cause, for individual students upon written request from the parents or legal guardian of a student under 16 years of age or from the student, if he or she is 16 years of age or over.

School Board Policies

School boards are encouraged to send home at the beginning of each school year a letter/booklet informing parents of the school board policy on opening exercises and the availability of exemptions for individual students.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

I. Elementary Schools

School boards are currently required to provide religious education in their public elementary schools. The current regulation with regard to curriculum, however, is totally inadequate. Other than the stipulation that "issues of a controversial or sectarian nature shall be avoided", no direction or assistance is available from the Ministry of Education on the required nature of the program in religious education.

Curriculum Guidelines

The Ministry of Education has failed to provide leadership and initiative in the development of adequate curriculum guidelines and resource documents.

The lack of leadership on the part of the Ministry of Education must be considered in light of the recent Supreme Court of Ontario decision on religious education in public schools. While the Ministry defended its regulations, it took no position with respect to the question of the constitutionality of the proposed curriculum of the school board in question.

If the Ministry is not willing to defend the board's actions in compliance with the regulations, then it should take a leadership role and provide specific guidelines for school boards to follow with respect to religious education in public schools.

Curriculum guidelines that recognize the pluralistic nature of Ontario society appropriate to the age level of the student and which stress awareness and tolerance need to be developed. OPSBA supports the recommendation of the Shapiro Report on the Funding of Private Schools that "a new

programme using new materials, a new guideline and presented from a comparative perspective might be a small but meaningful step in the development of tolerance and understanding within the province".

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association believes that it is essential for the Ministry of Education to develop clear curriculum guidelines and resource materials as well as promoting the sharing of resources and materials among school boards.

Curriculum guidelines and materials should be prepared in the same way and be subject to a similar process of development as are guidelines and materials for other subjects.

To aid in this process, OPSBA recommends that:

- The Ministry of Education establish an Advisory Committee which reflects the multi-faith nature of our society and includes representatives from school boards and teacher groups to develop curriculum guidelines and resource materials appropriate for a pluralistic religious education program.

Teachers

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association recommends that religious education be taught by the regular classroom teacher, not clergy or laypersons. In this way, religious education can be integrated into the classroom and not be perceived as a separate part of the curriculum.

However, OPSBA recognizes that teachers have not been adequately trained to teach religious education and require adequate pre-service and in-service education.

a) Pre-Service Education

Student teachers must be properly prepared to teach religious education in the

faculties of education. Provision needs to be made for courses in religious education for students who will be teaching in the public school system as well as the separate school system.

b) Additional Qualifications

The ideal situation is for the teacher to have the appropriate qualifications to teach religious education. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education approve additional qualification (AQ) courses in the teaching of religious education similar to those the Ministry has recently developed in primary science.

c) In-service Education

The Ministry of Education must provide adequate funds to encourage school boards, in partnership with other agencies and groups to sponsor in-service opportunities for teachers and their administrative, supervisory and resource personnel. These must not be just incentive funds but ongoing funds which will adequately meet the ongoing needs for curriculum renewal and teacher in-service.

Provision of Religious Education in Elementary Schools

Once adequate Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines and resource materials are available, and teacher training programs are in place, then school boards can be expected to make a decision as to whether to provide religious education in all or some of the elementary schools within its jurisdiction.

OPSBA recommends that the provision of religious education in the public elementary schools of this province should be at the discretion of the local school board in response to local community wishes and concerns in the school area.

Once the school board has made a decision with regard to the provision of religious

education, the Ministry of Education must be informed of the school board's policy on the teaching of religious education.

If the decision is made to provide religious education in some or all of the schools within the board's jurisdiction, the board must be accountable for this decision and must abide by the Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines for the program, as it is for the provision of any other program provided at the elementary school level.

Exemptions

If religious education is being provided in an elementary school, provision should be made for individuals to seek exemption. The religious education program, based on the Ministry of Education developed guidelines and resource materials which provide for a multi-faith perspective and teach tolerance and understanding, should, however, minimize the need for personal exemptions.

Exemptions should be permitted without cause, for individual students upon written request from the parents or legal guardian of a student under 16 years of age or from the student, if he or she is 16 years of age or over, and include situations where a public school board purchases elementary school services from a Roman Catholic separate school board.

School boards are encouraged to provide alternative supervised activities for those children exempted from religious education classes. Exemption should not be perceived as a form of punishment.

II. Secondary Schools

Currently, religious education is not mandated for secondary school students. OPSBA recommends that religious education

remain an optional program for secondary school students in Ontario. However, adequate Ministry guidelines and resource documents must be available.

Curriculum

Consistent with the recommendations for the elementary school course in religious education, it is recommended that all courses in religious education have appropriate Ministry of Education guidelines and resource documents developed for them. Courses in religious education should be treated no differently than any other part of the curriculum.

Under the current OSIS guidelines, an optional multi-faith course in World Religions is available for one credit toward the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

OPSBA recommends that provision be made for two optional credit courses in religious education at the intermediate and senior level. These courses should be non-confessional in nature and include a comparative perspective and should be offered by school boards where numbers warrant.

Teachers

Religious education courses for credit must have appropriate qualified personnel to teach them. It is recommended that the current provisions for a three-session additional qualification in Religious Education be continued and that teachers have at least Part 1 in order to teach religious education courses at the secondary level.

The qualifying courses should be non-denominational in nature and should be based on guidelines laid down by the Ministry.

Although it is recommended that only qualified teachers teach the credit courses in religious education, laypersons and clergy of

various faiths could be used as resource people for the courses.

Adequate pre-service and in-service education for secondary school teachers is also required as per the recommendations for elementary school teachers.

SUMMARY

In summary, in recognition of the multi-faith nature of Ontario society and the role that religious education can play in the teaching of tolerance and understanding, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association recommends:

Opening Exercises

1. That the Ministry of Education establish an Advisory Committee on Religious Education which reflects the multi-faith nature of our society and includes representatives from school boards and teacher groups;
2. That guidelines for opening exercises be established by the Ministry of Education and resource documents be developed under the leadership of the Ministry through consultation with the multi-faith Advisory Committee on Religious Education;
3. That the school principal, after consultation with the local community, select the readings using the Ministry of Education established guidelines and resource materials;
4. That the current regulation mandating the provision for opening exercises for the public schools of Ontario be retained but that the content of these exercises be based on guidelines and resource documents developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Education;

Religious Education

5. That any form of religious education in the public schools of Ontario should be multi-faith and multi-cultural in approach, rather than confessional;
6. That the Advisory Committee on Religious Education develop curriculum guidelines and resource materials appropriate for a pluralistic elementary school religious education program;
7. That religious education be taught by the regular classroom teacher, not clergy or laypersons provided that: provision is made for courses in religious education in the teacher education faculties; the Ministry of Education approves additional qualification (AQ) courses in the teaching of religious education; and, adequate in-service training programs are established and ongoing funds provided by the Ministry of Education;
8. That the provision of religious education in the public elementary schools of this province be at the discretion of the local school board in response to local community wishes and concerns;
9. That exemptions should be permitted, without cause, for individual students upon written request from the parents or legal guardian of a student under 16 years of age or from the student, if he or she is 16 years of age or over, and include situations where a public school board purchases elementary school services from a Roman Catholic separate school board;
10. That religious education remain an optional program for secondary school students in Ontario;
11. That provision be made for two option-

- al credit courses in religious education at the intermediate and senior level; and
12. That the current provisions for a three-session additional qualifications in religious education be continued and that teachers have at least Part 1 in order to teach religious education courses at the secondary level.

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